ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
29 April 1986

U.S. fears Soviets' new tactics may defeat Afghan guerrillas

By Roger Fontaine
and James Morrison
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

New Soviet tactics in Afghanistan are causing some Reagan administration officials to worry that the tide of the 6-year-old guerrilla war may be turning in Moscow's favor. Of particular concern is the use of helicopter-borne special forces.

Officially, the State Department remains optimistic about the Afghan rebels' ability to prevent a Soviet victory, despite the destruction last week of an important mujahideen stronghold in the eastern part of that war-ravaged country.

The target of the Soviet assault was Zhawar, a mile-long underground complex of bunkers and storerooms in Paktia province, which also served as a major training and supply base. The site commands routes over which supplies and reinforcements are moved to the rebels from just inside Pakistan, where some 3 million Afghans live in refugee camps.

At the end of last week, State Department spokesman Charles Redman said that casualties ran to the hundreds on both sides and the base was a smoking ruin. Guerrilla commanders, who usually understate their losses, acknowledged about 150 dead and 300 wounded. (Some intelligence estimates have ranged much higher.)

But Mr. Redman discounted the impact of the Soviet victory. "The Soviets and Afghan forces have demonstrated, as in the past, that they can gain control of a given patch of territory if they are willing to commit sufficient forces," Mr. Redman said. "When they withdraw, however, the resistance returns."

Other administration officials are less sanguine. "The focus on the body count is wrong," said one. "The important thing is the damage done to mujahideen logistics and morale because the Soviets are proving to the population that the government is on the winning side."

One independent analyst described the Soviet disruption effort as going "exceptionally well," but, he added, "we will know the real impact" on the Afghan rebels "within three or four months."

Other analysts are worried that Zhawar could be the beginning of a trend. Even before its destruction, they noted that the Soviets have adapted to the mujahideen's guerrilla tactics by improving their own mobility, firepower and reaction time.

The use of special forces — seven "Spetsnaz" battalions and seven airborne regiments in particular — have helped greatly. There also has been a marked improvement in Soviet capability to collect and to use intelligence.

The number of Russian advisers working with the Afghan version of the KGB, the Khad, has increased; and most serious intelligence work — including the handling of spies within rebel ranks — is now done by the Russians themselves, these analysts say.

That, in turn, has helped speed up the process of intelligence assessment, and field commanders are now allowed to act immediately on the information they receive, these sources say. Soviet operational control has also been greatly decentralized, allowing local Soviet commanders to go on the offensive without clearance from Kabul — a change that came in 1984, the same sources say.

Before then, it could take weeks before an operation was approved, giving ample time for rebel units to be forewarned. Making matters worse for the Soviets, the actual fighting was usually done by unreliable Afghan army units.

Now Soviet crack special force units acting on fresh intelligence and backed with locally assigned helicopter gunships move quickly into action. The result has been a great increase in close combat and successful ambushes, which have inflicted heavy casualties on the mujahideen and, even more importantly, on their commanders, these analysts contend.

"The bulk of the best commanders have been isolated in pockets or slaughtered," said one independent defense analysis — a development that one State Department official denies.

"I've heard nothing about a significant level of assassinations. There is no lack of leadership."

Despite the forebodings of some analysts, most U.S. officials tend to downplay the significance of Zhawar other than a "logistical setback."

"They [the mujahideen] got their nose bloodied, but we don't think it was any more than that," said one State Department official familiar with the military situation in Afghanistan. Another official said the effect on the supplies will prove temporary because the rebels have too many routes available to them.

Robert Neumann, former ambassador to Afghanistan, told The Washington Times that Zhawar itself had been overrun "many times before."

"It's been a loss, but it's no Cam Ranh Bay," he said.

Some American officials were also impressed with the cooperation shown by the usually fractious guerrilla groups when one rebel band rescued another that had been pinned down by the Soviet and Afghan army shelling of Zhawar.

"The key thing is that the fighters rallied to those in trouble," one official said.

The official also noted the rebels' determination to move back to their base camp as soon as the government offensive ended.

"The minute the Soviets left, they came right back," he said.

Nevertheless, many analysts of the Afghan war still question the wisdom of the rebels having a major base camp that can be targeted to attack by the government forces.

"Part of the reason they want to return to the camp is so the commanders can show how important they are," one State Department official said.

At the same time, most officials and analysts believe the attack on Zhawar is not an isolated incident in this long and brutal war.

It came at the beginning of the Afghan spring when the snows melt and the passes clear, making serious fighting as well as a Soviet offensive possible once again.

"For the past 18 months, the Sovi-

Continued

2.

ets have increased the pressure on the supply lines near the Pakistani border," said Zalmey Khalilzad, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff.

The attack on Zhawar, according to Mr. Khalilzad, was also meant as a spoiling operation. Although it had been hit before, the earlier attacks were not as severe, he added.

Still the overall picture is not encouraging for some officials. "It's distressing," said one State Department official familiar with the intelligence. "[The Soviets] have more resources, better tactics, and the Afghanis are still not receiving very sophisticated equipment. If they get the Stingers [a U.S. built anti-aircraft rocket], it will be too little, too late," he said.

Other analysts pinpoint rebel weaknesses as a lack of communication and coordination as well as their shortage of anti-aircraft weapons.

"Unless these deficiences are remedied, the mujahideen will fall further and further behind the Russians in combat effectiveness," one analyst told The Times before the capture of Zhawar.

The majority view, however, is that the war is still in a stalemate; while the level of fighting has increased, each side is giving as good as it gets.

"The Soviets do not have the upper hand in an overall sense," said Mr. Khalilzad. "They are far from winning the war in Afghanistan. I see no end to this until the Soviets are willing to accept a political settlement."

But another administration official expressed doubts that will happen under circumstances favorable to the rebels. "The political settlement in Afghanistan will come only as a ratification of a Soviet military victory," he said.